



Why America should continue to lead NATO and why Europe should embrace U.S. leadership

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This policy brief elaborates on the circumstances of the United States' dwindling leadership role within the multilateral alliance. The ramifications of this leadership decline is evident in the lack of coordination regarding policy in Syria and Iran and in the doubts cast by the U.S.' role as the guarantor of last resort for the European continent.

This brief will firstly discuss the reasons why the U.S. is stepping back and then, secondly, what this means for European nation states. In this context, it considers whether the EU has the capacity to replace the U.S. if it continues in shedding its traditional leadership role. In the past, EU leadership meant the promotion of the Union as an exemplar to third parties. What would EU leadership look like today and what challenges would the EU face in taking on such a role?

This policy brief will finish by offering six concrete policy recommendations that accept the reality that there is no other serious contender for leadership within the NATO framework aside from the United States (with the support of the EU) on a variety of security and defense related issues. Moreover, there is no serious alternative security and defense framework to NATO for the West in the near and medium term, which Europeans must acknowledge and even utilize as the basis for renewal of their partnership and the advancement of joint-leadership capacity.

The U.S. Retreats

The United States has been the postwar leader in transatlantic security relations under NATO since its founding in 1949. However, over the last couple of decades, it retreated from this function for a number of reasons. Firstly, because publics in both the United States and Europe were preoccupied by sagging economies. Tight budgets

certainly affected the U.S.' capacity to lead during the Barack Obama administration and are still relevant today at a time when younger Americans are far less likely than their parents and grandparents to support higher levels of military spending.

The second factor exerting on the U.S.' propensity to lead is related to the fact that U.S. foreign policy has become generally more circumspect. Already under Obama, but certainly under Donald J. Trump's *America First* approach to the world, U.S. foreign policy began to focus on specific challenges confronting the U.S. and the opportunities open to it to meet those challenges, rather than elucidate long-term commitments or a particular grand strategy. Trump's transactional foreign policy, which often appears to be driven by a potential for personal gain, points to a zero-sum view of the world, which he thinks plays out primarily in economic competition.

While Trump's wheeler-dealer, opportunistic world-view may be transitory, two of the top three Democrats who vied for the presidential candidacy agree with Trump that preserving or extending American leadership around the world is an "increasingly insolvent" idea.¹ Both Senators Bernie Sanders and Elizabeth Warren as well as the Democratic party's new strategic thinkers argue that Trump is partially right with adopting a concept of U.S. *restraint*.



A Back-to-the-Future world?

A third reason that U.S. leadership in NATO is in decline is related to the new global power configurations that have emerged over the past decades. The world is experiencing a shifting balance of power that translates in the U.S.' strategic gaze being increasingly drawn to the Pacific and less to the Atlantic. Moreover, the world is returning to a great power competition where authoritarian regimes are on the rise while at the same time instability and terrorism persist. In this back-to-the-future world, 2014 was a turning point with such events as Russia seizing Crimea and destabilizing the Donbas region of Ukraine, the shooting down of Malaysia Airlines Flight 17 and the rise of the Islamic State group in the Middle East.

Fourthly, the U.S. is losing patience with its European NATO allies to reverse the decline in their defense spending as well as to be less inward looking. Trump's transactional approach clearly criticizes what he views as free riding but Obama also explicitly demanded that all European partners "step up to the plate and accept responsibility, rather than letting the United States take the strain."² Trump's transactional approach is further hastening a U.S. withdrawal or distancing from a number of international organizations, including NATO. Reiterating this change, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, in his December 2018 address to the German Marshall Fund, was critical of multilateral institutions like NATO and their utility to support American interests.

Autonomous Dreams

While America's desire to lead has been in decline for some time, Trump's presidency has clearly accelerated restraint ideas. Thus, if Trump wins a second term in office Europeans can expect a further shedding of leadership or even withdrawal from NATO. As Constanze Stelzenmüller points out there is a sense in Europe that if there is a second Trump term, then the likelihood of the U.S. withdrawing from the alliance is great.³ Although he is a controversial source of information, in November 2019, Trump's former National Security Adviser (NSA) John Bolton echoed Stelzenmüller's point when he warned that, if re-elected in 2020, Trump might go "full isolationist" and withdraw from NATO.⁴

In response to this possibility, along with Trump's outright undermining the unity of the alliance, European

leaders⁵ have given voice to the possibility that the EU assumes leadership for its own security and defense. For example, German Chancellor Angela Merkel remarked that Europe can no longer depend on the U.S. and must take destiny in its own hands.⁶ Similarly, in an interview with *The Economist*, French President Emmanuel Macron said that because NATO was experiencing "brain death," Europe should defend itself.⁷

Beyond defense, Macron also wants Europe to move into security. In 2018, Macron created the European Intervention Initiative (E2I) with 14 other states (some from outside the EU) to address future crises jointly and develop a "common strategic culture." Together with the newly financed European Defense Fund (EDF) and the 34 Permanent Structured Cooperation (PESCO) projects, Macron believes that E2I can provide the foundation for Europe's autonomous security and defense.

What are Europe's prospects to take over the lead?

Articulating the possibility that the EU must provide the leadership and the wherewithal for its own security and defense is not a new phenomenon and, in fact, events in Southern and Eastern Europe starting soon after the end of the Cold War meant that Europe began to seek a security and defense role for itself. The EU's early momentum towards becoming a military actor was harnessed in the Common Security and Defense Policy (CSDP) in 1999 and the Berlin Plus agreement in 2002, which gave the EU recourse to NATO assets. Since the EU enlargement in 2004, however, the Berlin Plus agreement has become unusable due to the political stalemate surrounding the division of Cyprus.

Development of the EU as a security actor came with the first civilian missions and military operations that were deployed in 2003 in the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia (FYROM)⁸ and Bosnia and Herzegovina (BiH). Currently, the EU has EUFOR Althea in BiH (from 2004 to present), which took over from NATO's operation IFOR (Implementation) and SFOR (Stabilization), and EULEX Kosovo (from 2008 to June 2020), which provides the civilian and rule of law dimension to complement NATO's KFOR, which provides military protection. These successes allowed the EU to fulfill civilian tasks that NATO did not.

Despite these measures, the EU's ability to manage



future crises is questionable, especially when its handling of a series of emergencies is considered. Recent tests that the EU has not handled particularly well include a sovereign debt crisis, a refugee crisis and resurgent nationalism (which added to underlying pressures leading to Brexit) and democratic backsliding by some EU member states.

Moreover, if the EU were to take over from the U.S. in leading or replacing NATO, it is not clear what such leadership would look like and what it would prioritize. The fact is that over much of the 70-year history of the alliance, security enhancement and procurement were not European priorities with the result that in recent decades European militaries have struggled to adapt and modernize.

Power Projection

Leading would also require an ability to project power and coax others to follow collectively, competences that in the short-term Europe does not have nor is it clear that it can develop such capabilities in the long-term. Projecting power needs substantial investment in armed forces to the tune of hundreds of billions. In a May 2019 report, the London-based think tank the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated that to defend Eastern Europe without the involvement of the U.S., European NATO members would need to invest up to \$357 billion and that closing the current military-capability gap would take 15–20 years.⁹ Even Macron's E2I, with its development of a "common strategic culture," looks unlikely to fulfill the leadership role. In a sharp critique, Nick Witney, a former head of the European Defense Agency (EDA) likened E2I to "Erasmus for soldiers."¹⁰ Such sentiments point to a heavy skepticism that the EU or E2I could lead or acquire an equivalent of Article Five in the near or long term.

Add to this that the EU's dense institutional architecture means that its institutions struggle to innovate in response to wide-ranging and often hybrid threats. To date, security and defense have not fared well in the community method and integration in the fields of security and defense are more superficial than real. Getting 27 countries to agree to a course of action and then convince partners outside the continent has so far proven an impossible task.

A Path forward: six recommendations to renew their partnership

Because future collective security and defense will remain under NATO's remit, European states must find meaningful ways to renew their partnership with the United States and develop a joint-leadership capacity. There are a number of approaches that Europeans might utilize. **First**, they might build on U.S. Congressional and public opinion that demonstrate full support for NATO.¹¹ For example, in October 2019, after Trump abandoned one of America's closest allies in the fight against terror in the Middle East (the Syrian Kurdish militia), Congress condemned him. As many as 159 Republicans sided with the opposition, in part, because they knew Trump's imprudent behavior put additional strains on NATO. By mid-December 2019, the Senate Foreign Relations committee took a further step in unanimously passing a bill to stop Trump from withdrawing from NATO. This legislation is important for European leaders but more significant is the sentiment behind it — members of the U.S. Congress want to ensure that America's strategic partnership with European nation-states endures.

A **second** tactic for Europeans is to build upon a common view of the world. For instance, by capitalizing on EU Commission President Ursula von der Leyen's goal of creating a "Geopolitical Commission." This might mean an EU that recognizes the strategic reordering brought about by the U.S.-Sino rivalry and Europe's potential to be a "force multiplier," especially in contesting Chinese economic practices like intellectual property theft.¹² Other related mutual viewpoints include security issues in the South China Sea, digital and physical infrastructure (5G) as related to Chinese companies like Huawei, trade issues related to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), China-related political issues such as human rights abuses of the Uighurs in Xinjiang province and Xi Jinping's deepening authoritarianism. In relation to many of these matters, the U.S. was gratified when the EU enunciated a shift on its China position in March 2019 when a Joint Communication labeled China a "systemic rival."¹³ However, when it comes to forging bonds over a common outlook on Asia, Europe must overcome the suspicions that its commercial interests trump its strategic ones. While for its part, the U.S. must reconsider its unilaterally employed tariffs on steel and aluminum, alongside the threat of further measures on automobiles, which cause the EU to employ a hedging strategy with China.



Geopolitical Mindsets

Forging ahead on geopolitical challenges means also constructing a new mindset – the **third** step for Europeans is the need to think more geopolitically about their potential influence on the world stage. Macron made this argument, pointing to the lack of European and alliance coordination on policy towards the Middle East and Syria. If European states were inclined to be self-confident, they might persuade the U.S. to construct a more coordinated decision-making process on policy in the Middle East while at the same time acknowledging the sensitivities of fellow NATO member Turkey. Coaxing Turkey might be a separate exercise since ahead of a NATO alliance summit in London in December 2019, Turkey's leader, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, announced that he would block NATO plans for the defense of Poland and the Baltic States until the alliance recognized the Syrian Kurdish militia as a terrorist organization.¹⁴

A **fourth** approach to forging joint leadership is to build on the fact that both parties need each other when it comes to protection against technological innovation and in particular cyber and space warfare. Combating Chinese espionage, which has become a serious cyber security threat with more hackers and related intelligence personnel than any other country in the world, is a common goal. After China and India tested anti-satellite missiles, it further makes sense to develop space defensive and offensive measures. Europe could augment the United States' higher levels of spending on military space capabilities. Since satellites are vulnerable (either through hacking or through missile strike), but also essential to modern warfare, protecting satellites could be a shared priority. The alliance took a step in the right direction in June 2019 when it adopted its first space policy, building on the creation of new space units in France, Great Britain and the U.S.

That ballyhooed two percent target

The **fifth** course of action that European nation states might employ, is building on the fact that more NATO member states are hitting the target of spending 2% of their GDP on defense. As many as nine members met the target in 2019. Similarly, they could strongly support Ursula von der Leyen's goal of taking steps toward "a genuine European Defense Union." In light of this goal, von der Leyen has given the new French commissioner for the single market, Thierry Breton, the additional role

of director-general for the defense and space industry. Breton should be encouraged to utilize the \$14.4 billion of the European Defense Fund, of which he will preside, in a way that complements U.S. defense research while at the same time bringing together more profitably Europe's current fragmented industry.

A **sixth** way in which to renew their partnership and develop a joint-leadership capacity is to reinvigorate trust between the United States and European nation states by reforming the post-war institutions that underpin their security and defense. Michael Smith, for example, argues in a forthcoming chapter on EU-U.S. diplomatic relations that, "The evidence that trust has been eroded, that communication has been in some cases a dialogue of the deaf and that coordination has been replaced by confrontation is compelling."¹⁵ As a start, European nations must also find a way to overcome their publics' distrust of meaningful European security and defense cooperation. European leaders must reach out to their publics, for instance, by engaging in a listening campaign with youth and civil-society organizations.

In the development of trust, Dutch Prime Minister Mark Rutte is right when he argues that Trump's rhetoric is an opportunity. "We have to make use of Trump's criticism of these organizations to start to improve them. It is a much more constructive [approach]," he advised.¹⁶ Whatever Trump's transactionalism might portend, it is still a fact that the United States and European nation states

Recommendations

1. Build on U.S. Congressional and public opinion that demonstrate full support for NATO.
2. Build upon a common view of the world.
3. Think more geopolitically about potential influence on the world stage.
4. Build on the fact that both parties need each other when it comes to protection against technological innovation and in particular cyber and space warfare.
5. Build on the fact that more NATO member states are hitting the target of spending 2% of their GDP on defense.
6. Reinvigorate trust between the United States and European nation states by reforming the post-war institutions that underpin their security and defense.



share common values and a common purpose, both of which remain a bedrock for future collaboration. However, without the glue of trust the alliance will not last another decade. Europeans must convince a second term Trump administration or any other administration that replaces it, that their efforts to build European security and defense capabilities are fully in support of NATO and not in any way designed to compete or replace the transatlantic alliance.

And, while Macron's enthusiasm for a strategic dialogue is met with skepticism in Poland and the Baltic States (where fears permeate that he is undermining the consensus against Russia's revanchist behavior), Macron is right that the Atlantic alliance is in dire need of new strategic coherence. Building on the five areas of common interest outlined above offers the best possible start for joint leadership and for the re-establishment of a true sense of solidarity.

Don't wait until November

The answer to why NATO members celebrate its seventieth anniversary is not the same for every member while the key functions of the alliance differs slightly for each NATO country. However, these facts have been true for the whole of NATO's history, with each decade of the last 70 years having an alliance crisis of some sort. As regards functions, some member states have preferred an international role for the alliance. For example, Greek perspectives on NATO's utilities remain shaped by its fractious triangular relations with Turkey and thus Greece has an obvious interest in an international role for NATO. Others, like Iceland, Norway and Turkey, have specific positions based on their membership of NATO and their non-membership of the EU. Tensions over where the alliance should function certainly go all the way back to the 1980s, when some European leaders bristled at military bases in the UK acting as the launching pad for American power projection in the bombing of Libya.¹⁷

Historically, Europeans have also often worried about American leadership and commitments. For example, in the 1970s when then U.S. President Richard Nixon and his Secretary of State Henry Kissinger embarked on a policy of *détente*, which attempted to bring about a global balance of power between the superpowers. Europeans initially felt that *détente* marginalized them and called into question the existence of the NATO alliance.

However, in time they came to appreciate the lessening of tensions.

At other times, the European member states have not been willing to follow America's lead, as during the 2003 Iraq War, when the perceived illegitimacy of the invasion led some European NATO members to question their exclusive reliance on an *American-led* alliance.¹⁸ Echoes of this sentiment were on display at the 2019 Munich Security Conference, when Vice President Mike Pence's claim that Europe was "following Trump's lead" was met with an awkward silence.¹⁹

While all of this past friction is real, the inclination of the United States over the past two decades to shed leadership feels more substantial and more pervasive for the reasons outlined above. When Trump's confrontational stance towards America's traditional allies is combined with his decisions to withdraw military resources from Middle East, the prospects for reinvigorating American leadership look meager.

Europeans will hope that whoever wins the 2020 presidential election, the preservation and co-leadership of NATO will be an articulated strategic objective. However, they should not wait for a November outcome, because not only might Trump win re-election, but also because Europe's vulnerability necessitates that its leaders start working toward coherent strategic leadership of the North Atlantic Alliance.

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